

## WINNING WAYS to Talk with Young Children

What happens when words, ideas, and feelings leave our mouths and enter the ears and eyes of a child?

It's called communication. It takes in not only what we say, but how we say it. And it is a key element in the healthy growth of healthy children.

Communication is more than words. We communicate with looks – smiles and scowls; with actions – hugs and slaps, and even with silence – warm and cold.

Adults usually communicate well with children when giving directions or explaining common dangers. On the other hand, they often have a hard time communicating when feelings – the child's or their own – get involved.

**Winning Ways to Talk with Young Children** shows by example how to begin talking and listening with feeling. It suggests ways to channel words and feelings that will be heard ... but not hurtful.

Good communication is important for now and later. It helps children to develop self-confidence as well as solid relationships with others. It makes life more pleasant for them and with them. And it helps them grow into adults who have good feelings about themselves, which they can communicate.

Good communication leads to warm relationships, cooperation, and feelings of worth. Poor communication leads to frustrating relationships, conflict, and feelings of worthlessness. Learning to be a good communicator is a good investment.

The pages that follow offer some good ways to talk with children. Use them along with your own experience and understanding of the children in your life to create your own "winning ways."

# COMMUNICATE ACCEPTANCE

When children know that you accept them just as they are, they are able to grow, change, and feel good about themselves. When children feel good about themselves, they are likely to get along well with others.

Accepting children — just as they are — makes talking with them easier. Children who feel accepted are more likely to share their feelings as well as their problems. Then you will feel less in the dark as a parent, relative, friend, or caregiver.

Both you and the children in your life will be winners.

## WHEN ADULTS:

THREATEN  
COMMAND  
PREACH  
LECTURE

## CHILDREN FEEL:

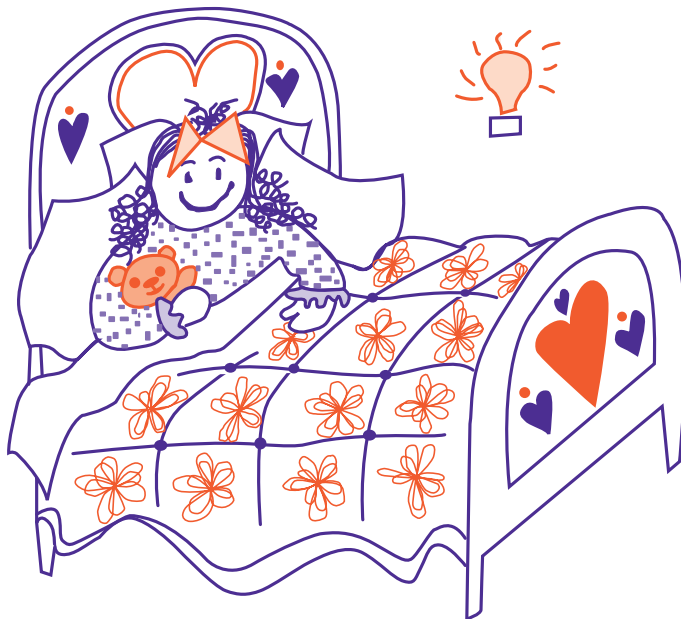
"I'M WORTHLESS."  
"I'M BAD."  
"YOU DON'T LIKE ME."  
"I CAN'T DO ANYTHING RIGHT."

## EXAMPLE:

Melissa says, "Mommy, I'm scared to sleep alone." Which response communicates acceptance?

- A: You ought to be ashamed! You're acting like a big baby! You know there's nothing to be scared of!
- B: I know you're frightened. I'll turn on the light and leave the door open for you.

(Example "B" Communicates acceptance)



## REMEMBER:

We can accept children without necessarily approving of their behavior. For example, we love and accept Sandra, but we don't accept her behavior when she pinches the baby or pulls the cat's tail.



## **USE DOOR OPENERS**

Door openers are invitations to say more, to share ideas and feelings. They tell children that you're really listening and that you're interested. Door openers also tell children that their ideas are important and that they are accepted and respected for what they are saying.

### **EXAMPLES:**

I see. ... Oh. ... Mm hmmm. ... How about that. ... Really? ... Tell me more. ... Say that again. I want to be sure I understand you. .... No kidding. ... That's interesting.

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## **LISTEN** ATTENTIVELY

Pay attention to what children say. Sometimes we're able to stop what we're doing in order to listen or listen while we're doing a chore like folding laundry. Young children usually want only 30 seconds or so to share their thoughts, their discoveries, and their enthusiasm. If you're really busy — and all adults have busy times — tell the children, "I'm busy now, but let's talk about that later." Don't pretend you're listening when you aren't. And do be sure to follow through on the invitation to talk later.



## **USE 'YOU-MESSAGES' TO REFLECT CHILDREN'S IDEAS AND FEELINGS**

"You-messages" describe children's feelings and encourage them to express their problems.

### **EXAMPLES:**

You're sad because your dog died.

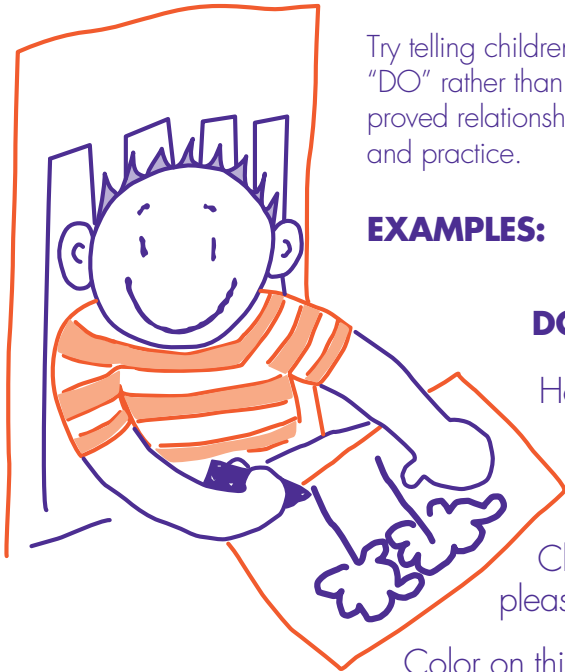
You're upset because you didn't win the game.

You're mad because Mary wouldn't let you play with her new toy.

When children are allowed to express bad feelings freely, the feelings seem to disappear like magic. On the other hand, hiding bad feelings can be self-destructive. These feelings don't go away. Instead, they can lead to headaches, ulcers, self-hate, and violence.



## DO SAY “DO”



Try telling children what to do rather than what not to do. Using “DO” rather than “DON’T” may be difficult at first, but the improved relationships that result will make it well worth your thought and practice.

### EXAMPLES:

#### DO:

Hold your coat so it doesn't drag.

Carry the kitty gently.

Close the door softly, please.

Color on this page.

#### DON'T:

Don't drag your coat on the ground.

Don't squeeze the kitty.

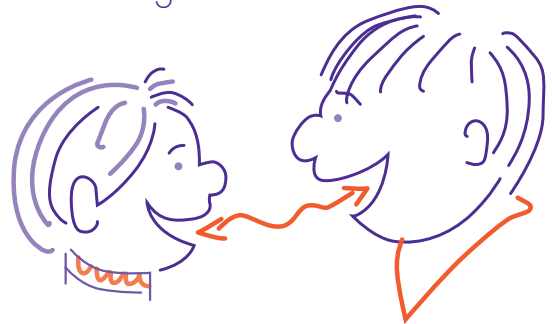
Don't slam the door.

Don't draw on the table.

### REMEMBER:

Use the same rules for talking with children as you use for talking with the most important people in your life.

## TALK WITH — NOT AT — CHILDREN



Talking with children is a two-sided conversation. Talking at children is one-sided.

“Put on your raincoat,” “You’re going to spill that,” and “You need a haircut” are examples of “talking at.” Adults who talk at children may excuse themselves by saying that a small child cannot converse at an adult’s level, but that isn’t really the point.

No one — young children included — likes to be talked at. Try talking with young children and notice the results.

Talking with children and then listening to what they do have to say are valuable habits to form early. They pay big dividends when the children involved become teenagers.

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# USE 'I-MESSAGES' TO TALK ABOUT YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

"I-messages" are statements of fact about the speaker. They can tell children how their behavior is making the speaker feel. Since young children frequently do not know how their behavior can affect other people, "I-messages" are much better learning tools than "you-messages" when children misbehave.

## I-MESSAGE:

I need help picking up now.

I don't feel like reading a story when I'm tired.

I sure get upset when I see mud on the floor.

I can't hear you with all that screaming.

I don't understand.

## YOU-MESSAGE:

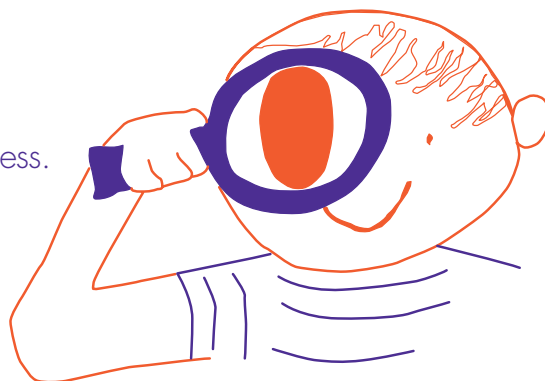
You sure made a mess.

You're a pest.

You ought to be ashamed.

You better shut up!

You're dumb.



"I-messages" give children the responsibility for changing their own behavior. For example, if the adult says, "I see a little bit of dirt on your face," then the child has the responsibility to do something about the dirt.

Don't use "I-messages" to express your anger to young children. Hearing about an adult's anger causes young children to feel very upset and insecure.

Instead of expressing anger, try to use your "I-message" to express the emotion that you felt just before anger. For instance, if your Katy spilled her glass of milk during a company dinner, you may well have felt embarrassment before you felt anger. Do say, "I am really embarrassed." instead of, "I am really mad at you."



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## MAKE SURE YOU HAVE AN AUDIENCE

Make sure you have an audience before you start speaking. Since children — and many adults — can concentrate on only one thing at a time, call the child's name, then allow time for all eyes to focus on you before you begin speaking. This saves time, frustration, and repetition for all parties.

### EXAMPLES:

"Jill." (Wait until she stops playing in the sand and looks at you.) "You have 10 more minutes to play outside."

"Jack." (Wait until he stops throwing the ball and looks at you.) "Dinner will be ready in 15 minutes."



## KEEP YOUR REQUESTS SIMPLE

Young children do their best when they carry out one order at a time. They have a hard time remembering a series of requests, so the adults who communicate best with them are the ones who keep their requests simple.

Three-year-old Sarah would be confused if you said to her, "Go to your room and hang up your clothes, but first pick up your toys and put out the dog." Both Sarah and the dog might disappear outdoors because "put out the dog" is all Sarah remembers.

Instead, separate your requests. Ask Sarah to pick up her toys. When that task is completed, ask her to put the dog outside. When the dog is out and Sarah is still in, ask her to hang up her clothes in her room.



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## **MAKE YOUR IMPORTANT REQUESTS FIRMLY**

Make sure your tone of voice is a match for your message, especially when you are making important requests of young children. Speak firmly, and give children the reason for your request.

Remember, children can think about only one thing at a time. When they're playing, it's hard for them to shift their attention to you. They don't like being interrupted any more than you do when you're reading your newspaper.

Requests delivered in a wishy-washy manner let children think you don't really care whether they do as you asked them to do.

### **EXAMPLES:**



"Please put on your coats. Then we'll be ready for the bus," tells the children what you want and why.

"Do you want to put on your coats now?" leaves the children thinking they have a choice when they may not, and it doesn't give them a reason for their action.



## TALK AT EYE-LEVEL

Eye contact improves communication. You may have to stoop or sit to be eye-to-eye with young children, but the results will justify your effort.

Adults don't always realize how they look to young children. In the eyes of a child, you may be a giant. Whatever you can do to minimize the distance and the difference in size will help improve your communications. After all, how well would you respond if a giant 10 feet tall glared down at you and shook her finger?

## BE COURTEOUS

Courteous children have courteous role models. The first step in teaching courtesy is being courteous.

Children learn by imitating the speech and behavior of the other people around them. Nagging a child to say "Please" isn't courteous. Saying "Please," "Thank you," and "You're welcome" to children — just as you would to adults — in the course of normal conversation sets the right example.

## LET CHILDREN TELL THEIR STORIES

Let children tell you about their adventures without interruption — from beginning to end — as often as possible. They need practice talking about themselves, and they need praise from you at the conclusion of their tales.

Practice and praise build self-esteem. Continual interruptions and criticism shut the door to communications.

For instance, Jeanie was quite excited when she got home. She wanted to tell her mother about the good time she had playing at Betty's house.

Jeanie's mother interrupted — at great length — to scold her for going to Betty's house without permission.

Jeanie immediately lost interest in sharing her feelings with her mother. Therefore, No Communication.

While Jeanie's mother needed to remind her daughter of their house rule about asking permission, she might have listened first and reminded later.



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## SPEAK KINDLY

Kind words bring happy results. Unkind words bring unhappy results.

Try to avoid unkind words that ridicule, shame, or label children. Being called “big babies” or “bad” makes children feel disliked. Worse, they may begin to dislike themselves and “live down” to such labels as “liar” or “thief.”

Unkind words don’t help. They only make matters worse.

Kind words, on the other hand, help children behave better, try harder, and achieve more. They communicate love and respect. They help create an atmosphere where problems can be discussed openly and understandings reached.

Suppose, for example, that a child has spilled his milk. You can say, “Don’t be so clumsy! Look at the mess you made.” — unkind words which lead to unhappy results. Or you can take a deep breath and say, “Here’s a sponge. Please help wipe up the milk.” — kind words which lead to happy results.



## SELF-TEST

At this point, you may want to see how much you have learned about talking with young children. The self-test that follows is for your eyes and your eyes alone if you so choose. On the other hand, you may have made so much progress that you'll want to show everyone your **WINNING WAYS to Talk with Young Children.**



1. Translate these DON'Ts into DOs.  
(Tell children what they can do.)

### DON'T:

Don't run in the store.  
Don't yell at me.  
Don't talk with your mouth full.  
Don't throw the ball in the house.  
Don't touch that.

### DO:

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2. Change the parents statements to "You-messages."

### CHILD

"You're mean.  
You let Terry stay  
up later than me."

"I hate Paul."

### PARENT

"I'm tired of  
listening to you  
argue with me."

"No, you don't.  
It's bad to hate  
people."

### YOU-MESSAGE

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3. Respond to the following situations with "I-messages."

Annie crossed the street to play without asking permission to go.

Billy dropped his toast and jelly face down on the brand new living room rug.

Janie's teacher reports that Janie got into a fight at kindergarten.

Rachel and Johnny jump around in the back seat of the car and begin to bicker as their mother is driving them to their grandmother's house.

4. Keep a record for one whole day of the way you respond to children when:

It's time for them to pick up their toys.

You think they have watched enough TV.

You take them to the supermarket.

They try to interrupt you when you are very busy.

5. Estimate the number of times during the day that you say:

Yes. / No.

Do. / Don't.

Go ahead. / Stop.

Please start. / Quit that.

Try another activity. / Cut that out.

What do you know about ...? / You know better.

6. Ask another person to tape record 10 minutes of your conversation with a child. Let it be at a time when you are not aware that you are being recorded.

Listen to the tape later and evaluate your tone of voice.



## SCORESHEET

Score yourself. Be kind ... give yourself credit for your efforts in the right direction.

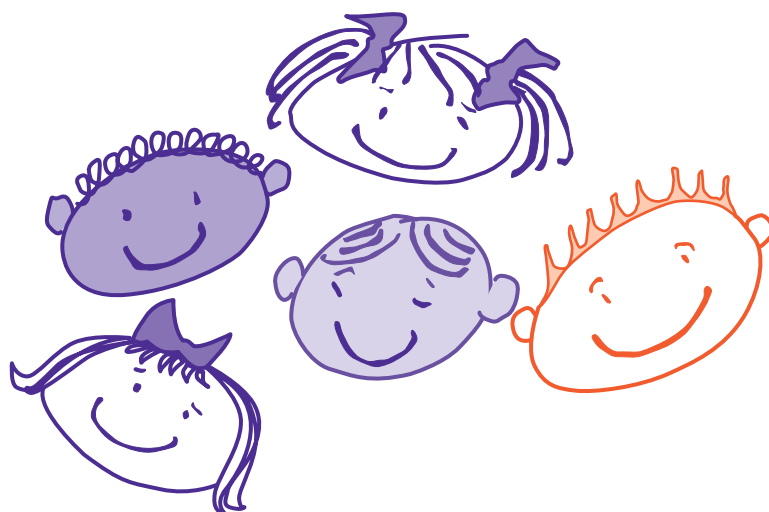
On the basis of your answers, enter your name in one of the following categories:

**YOU HAVE VERY WINNING WAYS,**

**YOU'RE ON THE WINNING TRACK,**

**YOU'RE TIED AT HALFTIME,**

**A LITTLE MORE EFFORT AND YOU'LL SCORE,**



## NOTES

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**This page is reserved for you. Please use it to jot down your thoughts and feelings, good books or articles related to "Winning Ways," or additional tips for communicating with young children.**

**Best wishes and good luck on this most important task.**